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The Károly Kós Experiment: Participatory Museography, Material Culture and Childhood



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ABSTRACT

The present article is the result of ethnographic research¹ in the counties of Covasna and Harghita, developed in two stages (June 2011 - January 2012) and discusses the methodological challenges posed by an exhibition project dedicated to childhood at the Székely National Museum of Sfântu Gheorghe (Covasna) and, in particular, of a collection of toys gathered following a collection contest. I am going to highlight the manner in which children's domestic bricolage becomes crucial in the Károly Kós experiment, an approach of contemporary archaeology, focusing on common objects whose biographies are continuously transformed by the various socio-cultural contexts in which they are placed².

KEYWORDS

Material culture, childhood, toys, museography

"The importance of material culture to children, and the centrality of children to our own lives, ensures their validity as subjects of study. Yet the importance of the relationship between children and material culture goes further than this. (Derevenski, 2000)

Over time, social sciences – except for psychology – have focused very little, if at all, on the study of childhood. In the past decades, however, the number of anthropologists and sociologists interested in researching the juvenile universe has risen. Nevertheless, the relationship between childhood and the material world populating it still remains a blank page. Things have recently changed, especially due to the boom in studies pertaining to the sociology of consumption. Having been turned into merchandise, childhood has increasingly started to draw the attention of market researchers³, but also of those who have critically opposed the emergent juvenile consumerism. Derevenski (2000) emphasized the fact that, obviously, a little

over a decade ago, childhood was still absent from the "archaeological narration". Under these conditions/ Given these circumstances, until recently, thematic exhibitions or entire institutions dedicated to childhood have been scarce in the world of museums. Children's material culture has lately become a fertile ground for understanding the way childhood is constructed via objects within the household, between the standard toys and the hand-made ones, with or without the help of adults. Based on a case study – the Childhood exhibition from the Székely National Museum of Sfântu Gheorghe – the present article investigates the social and material biographies of these objects and their transformation from common artefacts into discursive, museum objects.



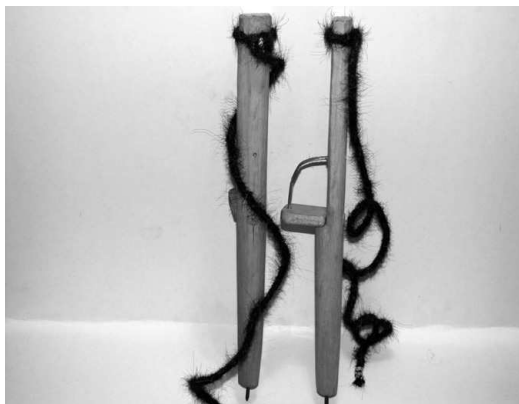
Childhood in town and at home

In the summer of 2011, during a brief field research in the region of the former Székely Seats, I discovered the exhibition Childhood

1) The research was carried out within the project Childhood. Remains and Heritage, run by the National Romanian Peasant Museum, with the support of the Culture Programme of the European Union.

2) The photos illustrating this article are part of the Székely National Museum archive.

3) A more in-depth discussion on the subject is presented in the documentary Consuming Kids: The Commercialization of Childhood (2008) by Adriana Barbaru and Jeremy Earp.



4) Gabriela Anghel, Alexandru Pantazica and Bogdan Moroşan also participated in the field research.

of the Székely National Museum of Sfântu Gheorghe (Covasna). I was trying to document⁴ the presence of objects specific to children's universe in the local ethnographic exhibitions, but a thematic exhibition turned out to be a much more pleasant surprise. As the visitors enter the exhibition, they are welcomed by a black-and-white picture of a girl blowing up a balloon displayed on one of the doors.

The exhibition structure is designed to illustrate the key moments of childhood and of the specific material culture lacing such moments, as well as on that of day-to-day games and toys: slingshots, bows, swings, ice skates, miniatures. Many of them look like they come straight from personal collections, without „benefiting” from embellishments and ostentatious pedagogy, specific to conservative ethnographic exhibitions. The ceiling is populated with a few kites which seem to be escaping the dioramas containing the objects. Another series of materials, photographs and toys that conclude this discourse, discreetly permeate the permanent ethnographic exhibition on the next floor. The red string completing this concerted approach is the attention to daily gestures and to game routines.

In January 2012 I returned to have a more in-depth discussion with Enikő Gazda, the ethnographer who designed this exhibition grounded in a hybrid collection, the result of several campaigns of item collection. The talks targeted the project of the exhibition, but focused especially on the biographies of the objects in particular.

As we are going to see, the collection of childhood objects from the Székely National Museum has a particular history, which will be the main topic of this paper to the extent that it offers fertile perspectives of investigation into the relationship between objects, the contexts of their appearance and means by which their specific trajectories can be modified.

Childhood seems to provide – not haphazardly – one of the most generous resources for alternative museography. For the exhibition at the Székely National Museum, the idea of delimiting the theme of childhood seems to have been founded in the balance against the classical exhibitions which illustrate pieces of the local handicraft:

When we decided upon the theme of the exhibition, we took into consideration that the museums in the nearby towns, in Târgu Secuiesc, Miercurea Ciuc, Braşov etc., as well as the local ones, presented exhibitions focusing generally on the local crafts. Therefore, we opted to do something completely different from what these museums offer their visitors. Around the year 2000 we agreed to hold a thematic exhibition on childhood, which would be followed by exhibitions on school life and adult life. (E. G.)

Actually, a substantial part of the exhibition scaffolding is generally based on artefacts specific to childhood and particularly on toys produced by local artisans from the beginning of the previous century until the 1970s. According to the ethnographer, the project of a thematic exhibition seems to have come up under favourable eco-cultural conditions:



The idea originated in the fact that we have a very large collection of objects pertaining to childhood: a part is from the old museum collection, built around 1900-1902, when a series of toys was bought from the market of Târgu Secuiesc, and around the 1940s when another series of old toys, house and cart models was purchased. To this we added a collection of toys from the 1970s...



The Károly Kós Experiment

The latter is the result of an experiment which is extremely rare, if not unique: between 1970 and 1971 the architect and ethnographer Károly Kós⁵ launched, via *Jóbarát*⁶ (a Hungarian magazine), an item collection contest for “popular” toys made by children. Károly Kós also popularized item index cards⁷, based on questions which the participants at the collection contest were invited to answer: the size of the toy, who had taught them to make it, what materials and means had been used in the process. The result was not only a collection of over 3000 toys (ingeniously made of wood chips, nutshells, corks, matchboxes, maize husks), but also a database on the games played in Transylvania and the region of the former Székely Seats in the '70s.

Children would send a text about how the toy was used, but also about games that didn't require the use of objects. The pieces were sent to Bucharest and then, because their description was in Hungarian, to the museum of Sfântu Gheorghe, especially since most were from the region of the former Székely Seats, where this collection had been formed. (E. G.)

The ethnographer regrets a selection process that occurred in Bucharest, when the objects that contained plastic material were eliminated before reaching the museum and, most likely, discarded. Fortunately, we did manage to obtain their descriptions, but the pieces were permanently lost, although “it would have been interesting to observe the change in the usage of materials for toys” (E.G.).

The above-mentioned intervention is part of a series of operations that institute, via selection, the natural relationship between objects which can be included in the cultural heritage and local cultural goods, considered specific or authentic (Herzfeld 1991, Palumbo 2003). The prevalence of materials such as wood, vegetable fibres and metal accessories rejected potentially symbolic pollution substantiality from the cultural ecosystem imag-



ined by the agents responsible for collecting the toys.

This option, very diffuse in several other cultural fields fuelled by conservative museographic ideologies, establishes an ideal type of authenticity (Thiesse 2000), which actually denies materiality perceived as problematic (Dudley 2012), but it also captures an essential element of the bricolage, that of generating alternatives to standardized objects and, eventually, of the real day-to-day life. The history of the lack of popular children-made toys in the domestic space thus materializes the narration of the cultural politics of the period in which the Károly Kós experiment was made

5) Károly Kós (1883-1977): renowned Transylvanian architect and ethnographer, author of the construction project (1911-1913) of the Székely National Museum building of Sfântu Gheorghe (Covasna).

6) The Hungarian equivalent of the Romanian magazine *Cutezătorii*

7) A similar methodology was applied by the research team involved in the project *Childhood. Remains and Heritage*, by completing object index cards for toys belonging to private collections.

and, even decades later, influences the current curatorial options.

Following its reception, the collection became an object of study and processing in two major stages: first, in the '80s, when museographer Klara Gazda dedicated to it several studies published in the museum journal – frequencies were observed based on age, type, materials, toy size –, but also part of the volume *Lumea copilăriei în satul Estelnic*⁸ and, subsequently, after 2000, when Enikő Gazda began preparations for the thematic exhibition *Childhood*:

Classification began around 2005, when we started to prepare the pieces. ... Naturally, we did select the pieces to be exhibited, but processing is rather difficult. During the contest, each child received an identification number and each toy had that number. So, if a child sent 20 toys and the toy descriptions were arranged according to the name of the child, not according to the number, then the processing part would be highly complicated. Each toy has to receive a sub-index and we have to look for the owner. In 1970 this was not possible because there was only one ethnographer here. On the other hand, trying to select objects so as

not to clutter the exhibition and lose its essence proved to be a rather challenging task.

Most objects collected in the '70s are placed in the perimeter which exhibits the girls and the boys' games. Klara Gazda's book was a source of inspiration for the projection of the exhibition as it contained processed versions of the collection's item index cards, but also a minute series of game routines, going so far as drawings that describe various types of childhood hairdos.

Also in the '70s, the magazine *Jóbarát* organized a similar series of contests. Therefore, another such collection came to life (about 350 pieces), that of miniature traditional costumes, transferred almost two decades ago to the Museum of the History of Guilds in Târgu Secuiesc: "We had to take this decision as we do not have enough space to exhibit the entire collection" (E.G.)

One final observation regards the coherence of the ethnographic discourse given by the frequency with which the background objects in photos are also illustrated in the exhibition. An example is the shot of a children's buggy whose owner, born in 1910, appears in the background.

As a matter of fact, the photos⁹ provided the possibility to reproduce highly perishable clothing items: "We had issues with the footwear because its preservation is very difficult and what you see here is brand new; here in Sfântu, with the help of an artisan, we made a re-enactment based on the photos" (E.G.).

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Material Culture and the Study of Childhood

Stemming not only from the need to categorize children, but also from the wish to surpass this endeavour by addressing the practical and theoretical implications of the research of children through material culture, Joanna Sofaer Derevenski launches, in one of the first volumes that deals with the relationship between material culture and childhood, a series

8) A similar methodology was applied by the research team involved in the project *Childhood, Remains and Heritage*, by completing object index cards for toys belonging to private collections.

9) A substantial part of the Székely National Museum photo collection is represented by photographs.





of questions that synthesize the challenges this type of study has been trying to face:

What constitutes a material culture of the child? Do all children have something in common that unifies them as a category and which also generates that category through material culture? Is there a cross-cultural material culture of the child or is it historically and contextually contingent? How are children perceived and constructed? [...] Since the concept of 'child' is intimately bound up with a notion of timed life course change, how does this relate to other categorisations such as 'adolescent', 'adult' or 'elderly'? How is knowledge transmitted and how can we use the categories 'children' and 'child' to explore questions of social and technological production and reproduction vital to an understanding of continuity and change in, and through, material culture? (Derevenski 2000, XV)

The last question in the series above is particularly relevant for the case discussed to the extent to which the exhibition creates a dialogue between objects produced in different technological and historical contexts, so as to stress differences and transformations, but

also to expose the continuity spaces of the material universe defined by toys.

At a closer glance, the collective bricolage that underlay the toy collection of the '70s at the Székely National Museum seems grafted on the series of objects circulated by the local artisans at the beginning and throughout the previous century.

The toys produced in the domestic environment inevitably break away from the (so-called) mass-produced toys through the number of material and technological solutions found to re-create, in variable forms, the model-objects. The pieces have index cards written by those who participated in the construction, which prove to be true material biographies. The approach advanced by Károly Kós therefore includes all the data of modern archaeology that ingeniously investigates one of those areas considered much too visible (Woodward 2007) to have been attractive to researchers: the objects created in the domestic environment.

The relationship between donor and receiver is not just that of delivery-reception, but one that sets the bases for a hybrid of participative museography (Duclos 2012), a crucial

component of forum-museums, despite the fact that there are several decades between the collection's moment of creation and its subsequent capitalization.

In this equation, toys become "objects of knowledge" (Pearce 1990), captured, explored, and capitalized via a relationship in which the nature of the object transfer to the museum is changed because it transforms the donor's passivity into participation.

Translation by Alina-Olimpia Miron



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